

Bernstein's New York

by *Russell Shorto*



I'm going to talk about Leonard Bernstein, but mostly I'll give some context to his life and music. Specifically I'm going to talk about Bernstein's New York. There is an immediate problem with this. Bernstein is a colossus, and so is New York. How to do justice to both in a short talk? I had the idea to lean on some of his contemporaries, including lovers and collaborators: the poets of his New York.

This is the New York of the forties and fifties: war years, postwar years, ripped and rusted years, superpower graffiti years, the age of hot dog bebop coffee house beatnik stuff, of mean streets. Of culture: High rise sky line on the Lower East Side, and Pillbox hats on Third Avenue, and Dylan Thomas drinking himself to death at the Whitehorse Tavern. Quote: "I've had 18 straight whiskies. I think that's the record." Under Milk Wood indeed:

*Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;...
Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,*

Bernstein wasn't a native New Yorker. He was a New Englander, from Massachusetts. His people were Jewish refugees from Rovno, or Rivne, in Volhynia, now the Ukraine; in the old country the men were rabbis going back generations. His dad, Samuel, went in an American direction: he sold hair care products. And Leonard sat down at the piano and never got back up: a prodigy, hungry, expansive, extroverted, cheerfully beyond the boundaries. While still a boy, he was walking one day past a house and heard someone inside torturing a piano composition. He walked onto the porch, climbed through the open window and sat down on the bench beside the startled woman and showed her how to play it.

From there he went to Harvard. And from there, obviously, logically, to Manhattan. An apartment on East Ninth Street. A friend of mine who lived for many years both in NYC and in Boston, once described the difference to me. Even after five years people in Boston asked him where he was from, how long he would stay. Whereas, he said, you move to NY, you get your corner deli and meet the super of your building, and you're a New Yorker. Simple as that. So Bernstein was a New Yorker. The Lower East Side. Worked for a sheet music company, gave piano lessons. There's a war on, kids shouting headlines from the street corners: Extra! German Planes Bomb London! Riots in Romania!

And then, talent recognized, he gets a job: assistant conductor of the NY Philharmonic. Not bad! In fact, it's pretty boring, since the only duty is to step in in case the main conductor falls ill, which never, ever, ever happens.

And then it happens: Nov 14, 1943, the guest conductor can't go on. So here he is, 25 years old, walks onto the stage at Carnegie Hall, stands in front of the orchestra, raises his baton. And wouldn't you know it, this evening the concert is being broadcast nationwide on the radio. He's had no rehearsals, but conducts Schumann's Overture to "Manfred," Rozsa's "Theme, Variations and Finale," Strauss' "Don Quixote" and Wagner's Prelude to "Die Meistersinger." The *New York Times* the next

day hails: "a dramatic musical event,": "youthful musician" at the podium "went through the ordeal with no signs of strain or nervousness."¹ The audience, sensing that history was being made, was "wildly demonstrative" by the end.

And so, in storybook fashion, he becomes a sensation. His career flowers, twists, warps and expands against the backdrop of New York and global turmoil such as the world had never seen and we are only now perhaps witnessing again: communism, cold war, spies and scares, hippies and drugs, heroin and hydrogen bombs.

It's all too much, and the artists and the painters, the composers and the composers, struggle for new forms, new words and ways. They have to curse. They have to sing. They have to howl. Allen Ginsberg, likewise a Jew, likewise gay (or, ok, bi, in Bernstein's case), likewise prowling the Greenwich Village alleys:

*I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for
an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection
to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking
in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the
tops of cities contemplating jazz...
who got busted in their pubic beards returning through Laredo with
a belt of marijuana for New York...
sun and moon and tree vibrations in the roaring winter dusks of
Brooklyn...
who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from
Battery to holy Bronx on benzedrine until the noise of wheels and
children brought them down shuddering mouth-wracked and
battered bleak of brain all drained of brilliance in the drear light of
Zoo...*

¹ New York Times, November 15, 1943.

But I digress. Be quiet, other artists said. They said just be quiet and listen. Listen to the traffic. Listen to its white-noise music.

Leonard Bernstein said that music is the metalanguage, that it can "name the unnamable, and communicate the unknowable."

His colleague, composer John Cage arrived in New York in 1942, about the same time as Bernstein. It was a heady time. Cage stayed with painter Max Ernst and art doyenne Peggy Guggenheim. He met Piet Mondrian, André Breton, Jackson Pollock, Marcel Duchamp. With Merce Cunningham he pioneered modern dance.

In 1952 Cage premiered his composition entitled "4' 33". I will now perform, unaccompanied, the first ten seconds. Imagine the giddy madness, the exuberance of pushing music to such an extent. What was the modern but cutting away all the clutter of the past? And what was the logical conclusion of that, but silence? People filled halls to hear it, dressed up for the evening, gowns and tuxedos. Were they being had? Were *they* being played?

Later, Cage said, "Actually what pushed me into it was... the example of Robert Rauschenberg. His white paintings [...] when I saw those, I said, 'Oh yes, I must.'"

Bernstein's friends and associates wove their own tapestries of New York. Ned Rorem, composer and writer and lover of Bernstein, described their meeting: "I was 19 in early 1943, when we met in his West 52d Street flat," he said. "Despite his show-biz personality he had, and forever retained, a biblical look, handsome and nervy as the shepherd David who would soon be king and psalmodized throughout his days. To me, a Midwest Quaker, his aura was Jewish and quite glamorous."

Rorem identified the quintessential paradox of Bernstein's identity and New York's:

"Was he indeed so American? He was the sum of his contradictions. His most significant identity was that of jack-of-all-trades (which the French aptly call *l'homme orchestre*), surely a European trait, while Americans

have always been specialists. If he did want desperately to create a self-perpetuating American art, his own music, even the Broadway scores, was a grab bag of every imaginable foreign influence. Night after smoke-filled night we could sit up arguing the point, for Lenny ached to be taken seriously as a sage. Nothing was ever resolved, of course..."

While Ginsberg was howling, Bernstein was too. Voraciously hungry, grabbing at everything: bebop, atonal, Beethoven and Charles Ives. Critics bitched about him. He called the deeply traditional world of classical music "a racket."

Nevertheless, he rose to the top of the racket. Bernstein rose above all of his contemporaries, became what some have called American classical music's first megastar. Frank Sinatra wrote to Bernstein on his 70th birthday. "Dear Genius," the letter began.

In 1949, Jerome Robbins called Bernstein with an idea to do an updated musical version of Romeo & Juliet. They decided to set it in New York, against the backdrop of warring street gangs. They picked out the barrio they would write about and called it East Side Story. Five years later, when they picked the idea up again, they changed to another neighborhood and so changed the name. When they filmed the movie version of West Side Story, on location, two years later, starring Natalie Wood, life imitated art imitating life, in perfect New York fashion. The set was robbed by the locals whose lives they were acting out; they were pelted with rocks. The police weren't able to fully protect them, and peace only came when the producers had the idea to hire one of the street gangs to protect them.

West Side Story was Bernstein's ode to New York. And New York returned the favor. In 1962, the city broke ground for the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, with Bernstein among the attendees. For what is arguably New York's premier classical music venue was built on the site of the very neighborhood that was the inspiration for *West Side Story*.

Bernstein was hounded by the FBI and by critics for much of his life. He was a Jew, a bisexual, an activist, an ardent advocate for civil rights. It

wasn't an easy life, but it was as full as one life could get and it matched the city it was lived in.

One of his friends and collaborators was the poet Frank O'Hara. I'll end with an O'Hara poem that seems to me to get at the texture -- and the music -- of the city that this young edgy genius moved through back in the day:

The Day Lady Died

BY FRANK O'HARA

*It is 12:20 in New York a Friday
three days after Bastille day, yes
it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine
because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton
at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner
and I don't know the people who will feed me*

*I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun
and have a hamburger and a malted and buy
an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets
in Ghana are doing these days...*

*in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine
for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do
think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or
Brendan Behan's new play or Le Balcon or Les Nègres
of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine
after practically going to sleep with quandariness*

*and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE
Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and
then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and
casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it*

*and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing...*

The imagery is apt: cartons of cigarettes, and stopping breathing. Bernstein was a lifelong, constant smoker, who died, at his apartment in the Dakota on the Upper West Side, at age 72, from lung disease.

Near the end of his life Bernstein wrote a defense of his decision to spread his talent broadly. "I don't want to spend my life, as Toscanini did, studying and restudying the same 50 pieces of music," he said. "It would bore me to death. I want to conduct. I want to play the piano. I want to write for Hollywood. I want to write symphonic music. I want to keep on trying to be, in the full sense of that wonderful word, a musician. I also want to teach. I want to write books and poetry. And I think I can do justice to them all." Like New York, he had little use for modesty.